

Frequently Asked Questions About ORV Access In The Pilchuck Area And The North Fork Nooksack River Area

The Pilchuck area, located in Snohomish County, 10 miles east of Lake Stevens, is now permanently closed to all motorized vehicles, due to environmental and public safety concerns.

Motorized access to DNR-managed lands in the in the North Fork Nooksack River area is limited to street-legal vehicles on roads only. The area is located northeast of Bellingham, near Deming.

Why is the DNR shutting down the only local ORV riding areas in Snohomish and Whatcom Counties, resulting in more impacts to areas that are still open, like Walker Valley and potentially more accidents? Are these closures permanent?

As has been stated in recent newspaper articles and in DNR's press release, these closures come as a result of concerns for public safety and environmental degradation. Continued efforts to educate users and design controls for safe and appropriate ORV riding have not proven effective. We understand riders' perspective and the inconvenience this imposes, but we are committed to enforce these closures on a permanent basis. State forest lands in the Walker Valley area, east of Mount Vernon, will continue to be the area where ORV riding is focused in Northwest Region, as we all work collaboratively toward a solution to safe and sustainable ORV recreation.

Since the P-5000 and the North Fork area are public lands, they should be open to use by all the citizens of the State for all recreation purposes.

DNR managed forest trust lands are not, legally speaking, "public lands"; rather they are lands held in trust for specific beneficiaries such as K-12 schools, universities, prisons and counties. The purpose of these trust lands is to produce perpetual revenue for the beneficiaries, while protecting public resources, i.e., water quality, fish and wildlife habitat and soil productivity. If DNR can provide recreational opportunities while still being good stewards of the land, it will do so under the multi-use concept. Generally DNR provides a primitive and dispersed recreational experience in a natural setting.

Who made the decision to close these areas and why didn't DNR solicit input from the public and organized user groups?

DNR came to the conclusion that closing these areas to ORV use was the prudent thing to do after many years of working with user groups and attempting to manage the use and protect both public resources and public safety. In making this decision DNR considered the continuous input from other land managers, regulatory agencies, county sheriff departments, emergency medical services and adjacent landowners regarding impacts from ORV uses and our plans to address them. Many of the organized user groups understand the issues and impacts ORV use was having in these two areas, and have long understood the potential for closing these areas. These areas have remained open as long as they have due to the excellent cooperation DNR has received from organized ORV groups.

What are the plans to address the increased used at Walker Valley or is DNR going to close it next?

DNR has no plans to close Walker Valley. It is the only designated ORV site in the North Puget Sound area located on DNR-managed lands. DNR continues to work with user groups to improve the area, harden trails to reduce negative impacts and design new trails, utilizing grant monies from the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation. It might be possible to increase the size of the riding area; but at this time there are no expansion plans. Northwest Region of DNR is also in the process of

hiring a new law enforcement officer to assist the current Education and Enforcement officer in patrolling Walker Valley.

The trails at Walker Valley are too difficult for young riders and families who want to ride together. Are there plans to address this?

We agree with the statement that Walker Valley is generally considered a moderate to difficult area to ride depending upon an individual's experience. DNR, along with user groups, is looking into possibilities of constructing some young rider areas, depending upon demand. If the decision were made to create such an area it would take a few years before this could be accomplished.

What is DNR going to do to accommodate the increasing pressure to provide appropriate places to ride, within reasonable commuting time of the population centers – no more than one to two hours?

Although DNR does not have as part of its core mission the responsibility to provide areas for ORV use, the Commissioner of Public Lands and the department are working with government and ORV leadership at the state and local levels to address the need for sustainable ORV riding areas around the state. We can agree that there is and will continue to be high interest in ORV activities in the Puget Sound area. Locating, authorizing, constructing, and maintaining new ORV sites will be a challenge. It is in everyone's interest to look beyond DNR-managed lands as the only option. Resolution of this issue will take understanding, cooperation and collaboration among many parties. DNR is part of this effort.

How is DNR going to enforce these new closures and restrict ORV use in other inappropriate areas in Whatcom, Skagit and Snohomish counties?

In addition to DNR's education and enforcement staff and ORV user groups, DNR will have the assistance of enforcement staff from local sheriff departments, Department of Ecology and Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Off road riding is causing little impact compared to logging. What are the direct and indirect impacts to water quality and salmon habitat from off road riding and how does this compare to logging?

Timber harvesting and road building activities on forestlands in the State of Washington must comply with the Forest Practices Rules as established by the Forest Practices Board. These rules do not allow sediment to enter flowing water in the course of conducting logging, road building, road maintenance or hauling of timber. Landowners are required to install bridges or culverts at all stream crossings, as well as before these crossings, to prevent road ditch water from entering the stream. Hauling roads are surfaced with rock and graded regularly to maintain good drainage. Compliance with these rules reduces or eliminates impacts to public resources across the state.

ORV riding on the other hand, without proper trail design and construction, is causing degradation to water quality, salmon habitat and soil productivity. Exposing soil by removing vegetation by overuse in areas or by crossing streams that disturb the stream channel and banks allows sediments to move downstream toward spawning and rearing salmon habitat. This sediment covers spawning gravels, preventing spawning or burying existing egg nests or "reds". At the same time compacting the topsoil by overuse reduces tree growth or prevents new tree establishment. The P-5000 area is also the municipal watershed for the town of Snohomish. Increased turbidity or hazardous material spills into the Pilchuck River may expose the residents to harmful effects.

In the past DNR has enlisted the help of ORV user groups in these areas to control use, patrol, post signs, pick-up garbage and haul off abandoned vehicles. Why not continue to utilize these groups in efforts to keep these areas open for riding?

User groups are and will continue to be a large part of the DNR recreation program across the State. Without them it would be very difficult to maintain a recreation program, especially in Northwest Region. Unfortunately, with the rapid population growth and ORV use in the area, the combined efforts of both DNR staff and the user groups has exceeded their ability to protect public resources and provide for public safety in these specific areas.

Who controls the money generated from ORV tags, where does this money go and how are priorities set for spending the money?

A small amount of the ORV tag revenue and a portion of the motor vehicle gasoline tax paid by users of off-road vehicles go directly to the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation. Federal, State, and local agencies, and Indian tribes apply for grants for specific areas or projects within the State. DNR is using some of these monies to improve Walker Valley as well as other designated ORV sites in the State. The P-5000 and the North Fork areas are not designated ORV sites. Grants are also used for Education and Enforcement activities. Additional information is available on the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation web site at <http://www.iac.wa.gov/>.

If DNR does not have the funding or staff to operate more ORV riding areas, can private organizations, individuals or companies purchase or lease DNR managed lands for this purpose?

This is an idea that has recently surfaced. DNR will consider this and other ideas while working with leadership from government, ORV groups and others in an effort to provide for sustainable ORV riding areas. It is important to also look at all ownerships, public and private alike, to determine the possibilities of purchasing or leasing land and developing ORV sites. Local counties and state regulatory agencies need to be partners and new ORV riding areas need to conform to State and County rules, permits and zoning.

What can individuals, families and organized user groups do to assist the DNR and elected State and County Officials with identifying, permitting, constructing ORV riding areas in Whatcom, Skagit and Snohomish Counties?

Currently, we are working collaboratively toward a solution. DNR is participating in the Legislative Taskforce, which provides the leadership and a strong foundation for a statewide perspective of ORV recreation impacts and opportunities for use. The Taskforce will make recommendations to the Legislature for the 2006 session. While this effort is ongoing we are asking riders to respect the closures and limit their use to designated ORV riding areas. Currently there are more than 400 miles of ORV trails, nine developed ORV areas, dispersed multiple use trails and a number of roads that are available on DNR-managed lands in the state. Within the three-county area in Northwest Region, Walker Valley is the only designated ORV use area. For additional information regarding Walker Valley and other riding areas around the state please visit the DNR web site at www.dnr.wa.gov or call the Northwest Region office at 360-856-3500.